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ABSTRACT

The issues of safety and discipline were among those addressed by a task force at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock which conducted a study of the Little Rock School District. During the course of the study, these issues repeatedly sifted to the top among concerns expressed by citizens, parents, teachers, and principals. "Safety" and "discipline" were generally interwoven in the minds of the people contacted. The purpose of this paper was to determine the extent to which each actually represent problems for concern. Based on police reports and school disciplinary information reviewed, there appears to be relatively little evidence that the public schools in Little Rock are inherently unsafe places for students to attend. School principals did not find violence to be an overwhelming problem, and only 13% of teachers and 18% of parents identified it as a major problem. Discipline, on the other hand, is a much different situation. Those finding discipline too lax were 46% of the school principals, 52% of the white teachers, 65% of the African-American teachers, and 70% of the community respondents. It is suggested that stakeholders acknowledge that violence and safety are different issues in public schools than are discipline problems. A positive school climate and proper security, it is claimed, are important, as is the school principal's attitude toward discipline. The media's role in publicizing school violence is considered. (Author/AA.)

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Running head: SAFETY OR DISCIPLINE: THE REAL ISSUE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Safety or Discipline:
The Real Issue in Public Schools

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Abstract

The issue of safety and discipline was among those issues addressed by a task force at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock which conducted a study of the Little Rock School District. During the course of the study, this issue repeatedly sifted to the top among concerns expressed by citizens, parents, teachers, and principals. "Safety" and "discipline" were generally interwoven in the minds of the people contacted. The purpose of this paper was to determine the extent to which each actually represent problems for concern.

Based on police reports and school disciplinary information reviewed, there appears to be relatively little evidence that the public schools in Little Rock are inherently unsafe places for students to attend. School principals did not find violence to be an overwhelming problem, and only 13% of teachers and 18% of parents identified it as a major problem.

Discipline, on the other hand, is a much different situation. Those finding discipline too lax were 46% of the school principals, 52% of the white teachers, 65% of the African-American teachers, and 70% of the community respondents.

Some of the reasons for the confusion between the two were discussed. Included were media treatment of incidents and harsher terminology used in the categorization of disciplinary violations in school materials.

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Safety or Discipline:
The Real Issue in Public Schools

Introduction

The goal of the school staff is, in part, to establish an environment which supports teaching and learning (Grossnickle & Sesko, 1990). In many communities across America, the perception of the public is that this goal is not being met. In fact, in several communities the public perception is that of frequent violent behavior in schools. That perception has been borne out in the responses which members of the public have given in responding to the Phi Delta Kappa and Gallup Poll, which is conducted each year and published in the Kappan magazine. In the last few years, discipline has been among the top concerns of those polled. Miller (1994) noted of the 1994 poll that, "... for the first time in the 26 years of the survey, the category of 'violence/fighting/gangs' tied for the top spot" (p. 7).

In addition, the National Center for Educational Statistics and the U.S. Department of Education have conducted an annual study of school problems since 1987 (Shen, 1997). Data from these studies reveal that the phenomenon of student disciplinary problems is more or less common in many urban, suburban, and rural areas of the country. Noguera (1995) stated that, "In many school districts, concerns about violence have even surpassed academic achievement - traditionally the most persistent theme on the nation's education agenda - as the highest priority for reform and intervention" (p. 189).

Lack of discipline, and more particularly, the existence of violence, is cited by some former or potential public school patrons as the primary reason for refusing to allow their children to attend public schools. This is based on a perception of an increase in the number of physical conflicts among students, verbal abuse of teachers, and weapons possession by students in these schools. When this perception is held, parents either withdraw their children from public schools in favor of private education or home schooling, or they simply refuse to enroll their children in public schools in the first place. At the very least, they question whether the public

schools are meeting their goals and remain as viable educational organizations for educating the children of America.

Why has this perception of rampant crime in the public schools of America become so pervasive? Many writers have pointed to reports by the news media as giving a false impression of the true situation. Leal (1994) noted about the public schools in San Antonio, Texas that, "Reading the city's major newspaper, one might get the impression that many schoolchildren are involved in crime and drugs. However, the reality is much different" (p. 39). Miller (1994) made a similar point in discussing the 1994 Phi Delta Kappa and Gallup Poll that, "Officials of Phi Delta Kappa and the Gallup Poll cautioned that the public may be reacting more to extensive media coverage of school violence than reality" (p. 7). And, finally, Noguera (1995) stated that, "Relatively speaking, young people may in fact be far safer in school than they are in their neighborhoods or, for that matter, at the park, the roller rink, or even in their homes" (p. 191).

There has also been the suggestion that the perception of school violence has been politicized. As the attitude of the public has become more harsh toward the incidence of crime and general lawlessness, there has been a tendency on the part of elected officials and school boards and administrators to adopt a "get tough" policy to convince the public that appropriate action is being taken. Leal (1994) noted that ". . . most educational outcomes are often the result of the compromise between competing interest groups in Texas politics" (p. 38), and Noguera (1995) said, "In response to the pervasive fear of violence among parents and students, politicians and school officials have pledged to quell the tide of violence by converting schools into prison-like, ' lock-down' facilities, and by increasing the penalties incurred for committing violent acts" (p. 190). This has led to "an increased tendency of school officials to treat violent incidents (and sometimes nonviolent incidents) involving students as criminal offenses to be handled by law enforcement officials and the courts, rather than by school personnel" (p. 190).

The Study Process

Little Rock, Arkansas is an example of a city that has seen "white flight" in its public schools, and also has seen similar flight by middle or upper class African-American patrons who are likewise concerned about the safety of their children.

The issue of safety and discipline was among those issues addressed by a task force at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock which conducted a study of the Little Rock School District (LRSD). The task force, consisting of eight faculty members and chaired by the Provost, produced a report in early-1997 entitled, Plain Talk: The Future of Little Rock's Public Schools. The two authors of this paper were among those who researched and wrote the report. The study was a component of a research project designed to provide a blueprint for the community and public schools to follow in addressing white flight, fiscal issues, student achievement, and enrollment in an urban public school system. The study was designed as a gift to the community, and had as its main focus addressing the issues attendant to the school district's long-term involvement in court-ordered desegregation. Many related issues were addressed in the report, however, among which were a lack of interracial trust and the subject of this paper, safety and discipline within the schools.

In the course of the study, which took in excess of 15 months from inception to completion, many sources of data and information were consulted. School district disciplinary reports and city police reports were studied, and surveys were conducted among white and African-American citizens, classroom teachers, and school principals. From this information, a picture of both the perception and reality of student violence and discipline issues was revealed. At issue was the public and media perception that there was considerable violence in the schools which threatened the safety of children and negatively impacted the learning environment. This perceived violence was often cited as the primary reason for white and, indeed, middle and upper class African-American, flight from the school district.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the circumstances of safety and discipline in the public schools. It relies on the in-depth study of one urban school district, with implications as may be deemed appropriate for other public school districts throughout the country.

The Setting

In Little Rock, Arkansas, as in other cities, the patrons tend to rate their children's own schools as better than the district and/or state schools as a whole. Nonetheless, increasing numbers of patrons have left the public schools in Little Rock over time. In 1957, Little Rock was at center stage in the national news as Little Rock Central High School was desegregated only after attempts by then-Governor Orval Faubus to prevent the "Little Rock Nine", nine African-American students, from enrolling. Then-President of the United States Dwight D. Eisenhower, ordered federal troops to ensure the desegregation of the school. Subsequently, the school district was desegregated with the process completed in 1970. Throughout this period of desegregation, the district has been under the aegis of the courts through several desegregation plans and multiple legal appeals, at least two of which ultimately reached the United States Supreme Court.

It is a simple lesson of arithmetic that schools cannot be desegregated unless students of both races are enrolled in those schools. Enrollment studies conducted during the course of the study earlier referenced showed that, in the period from 1958 to 1996, the number of white students in the public schools in the Little Rock School District decreased, in round numbers, from 16,500 to 7,700, whereas the number of African-American students increased from 6,000 to 16,700. The school year when the numbers balanced was 1974/75.

In an effort to address the trend toward a majority African-American enrollment, as well as fiscal concerns relative to the increasingly urban nature of the school district, a desegregation suit was filed by the Little Rock School District in 1982. The nature of the suit was an allegation that the activities on the part of the surrounding school districts in the county (the North Little Rock School District and the Pulaski County Special School District) and of the state were resulting in a resegregation of the LRSD. The LRSD prevailed and, for a time, the percentage of

white patrons in the district increased. Subsequently, however, issues such as classroom discipline, school attendance zones, and student achievement have caused the district to become less desegregated than it was at the time the suit was filed.

Safety and Discipline

In the course of the study that was conducted, safety and discipline repeatedly sifted to the top among concerns expressed by citizens, parents, teachers, and principals. In most cases, "safety" and "discipline" were interwoven in the minds of the people contacted. Because they can be quite different, they are treated in this paper in separate sections.

Safety

"Two telephone surveys were conducted by the Institute of Government at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock between March and May 1996. The surveys included responses from 564 white households and 611 African-American households in Little Rock" (Chamberlin & Sewall, 1997, p. 5). Interestingly, the attitudes of Little Rock residents surveyed, both white and African-American, were consistent with those found in national polls. Specifically, these people identified safety and discipline as being among the major problems to be addressed, but tended to see the schools attended by their own children as relatively free of the problems cited at the district level.

It is probable that the major reason why parents tend not to send their children to Little Rock schools, particularly at the secondary level, is a fear for their safety while at school. Coverage of incidents by the news media in Little Rock, like other venues, tends to exacerbate this fear and to create a sense of coincidence between violence and discipline in the minds of the patrons. Violence is, of course, a safety issue.

Among the data reviewed by the task force which wrote Plain Talk were police reports for the schools and the demographic areas identified in those reports. The police data showed that, in fact, relatively few violent behavioral incidents were experienced in the individual schools and in the district in general.

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"In the five years from 1990/91 to 1994/95, 64.2% of the disciplinary incidents in the LRSD were categorized as minor violations or disruptive conduct; 33.8% were for fighting, assault, battery, and riot; 1.8% were for possession of weapons; and 0.3% were for students being identified as gang members (Chamberlin & Sewall, 1997, p. 6). The preponderance of such offenses occurred at the junior high school level with senior high running a close second. Enrollment at these two levels, junior high (grades 7-9) and senior high (grades 10-12), ranged from 5,862 to 6,166 at the junior high level during this period, and 5,162 to 5,632 at the senior high level.

Although there are no data to indicate that any significant change in the number or type of offenses occurred within the secondary schools in Little Rock during the five-year period studied, the number of police calls made by the schools did increase by approximately 140%. This was due in large part to two events. One was the passage of Act 888 of 1995 by the Arkansas General Assembly. That Act required that all violent acts against teachers, staff, and students be reported to the police. Failure to make such notification is construed by the Act to be a misdemeanor and, therefore, punishable under the law. From this point on, a scuffle, which in the past would have resulted in a disciplinary action on the campus but would not have involved a call to the police, now warrants a police call.

The second significant occurrence which may have resulted in an increase in police calls was the 1994 decision of the school board to place uniformed officers in all secondary schools. Such police resource officers were to assist principals in the process of ensuring school safety. An expected major benefit was to familiarize youngsters with the police and, therefore, build a productive relationship between youth and the police officers. Police resource officers would be able to teach about safety; counsel students regarding crime prevention; and be available should police intervention be needed as the result of a fight, the possession of drugs, or in the event a weapon did find its way to the campus. And, finally, the presence of such resource officers was expected to provide comfort to those parents who were concerned about the safety of their secondary school children.

The presence of police, as well as revisions in the strict disciplinary handbook which school officials use in the district, led to the appearance of such terminology as "assault" applied in the case of fighting, or even in the case of unwanted "touching" of another person without any resultant physical harm. Such occurrences are now reported as assaults, however, and they are classified as misdemeanors. ". . . criminal law codifies any person's threat of bodily harm to another as a 'terroristic threat' and a misdemeanor charge may result because of verbal behavior only (Plain Talk, 1997, p. 144).

While the schools appear to be secure and relatively untroubled by violence or safety issues, other than the occasional fight, argument, or petty theft historically associated with students, the use of more harsh terminology and the presence of police officers in the schools lead to a double edged sword. They lend credence to the belief of those who assume that the schools are unsafe, or who wish to use such factors as justification for placing their children in private or home schools. In fact, the survey data indicated that the parents of children enrolled in schools outside the district tended to rate safety much lower than did parents whose children were enrolled in the district. Still, although there may be relatively little true evidence that the schools in the LRSD are unsafe, 18% of both African-American and white parents indicated that violence was the second greatest concern facing the LRSD. Only about 13% of the teachers rated violence as a major problem, while school principals rated violence low and discipline as a major problem.

Discipline

The lack of school discipline among students is a major factor in the disruption of the learning process. Teachers, students, principals, and patrons all identified discipline as a serious problem within the schools of the LRSD. Of the 26 principals who responded to a mail survey, 46% said discipline was too lax. Teachers, both white and African-American, identified discipline as their top concern, and 70% of the patrons in the survey felt that discipline was too lax (Plain Talk, 1997, p. 140). Junior high teachers tended to see discipline more negatively than

any other group, and disciplinary sanctions were higher in junior high schools than any other organizational level.

Private school parents included in the survey indicated that safety and discipline were major factors in their choice of schools. Of the 77 private school parents surveyed, 39% cited a lack of discipline and safety issues in the public schools as the basis for their school choice. Better safety and discipline were the conditions under which 45% of them said they would again enroll their children in public schools, but 40% indicated that their knowledge of the public schools was gained primarily from the news media rather than from students or the parents of students who attended public schools (Plain Talk, 1977, p. 208).

The telephone survey of citizens of the community was conducted in two parts. The first was to approximately 800 households including both black and white citizens, both parents of school age children and people who had no children in school, and parents who had children in both public and private schools. In this part of the survey, 20% of the respondents identified discipline as the major problem facing the schools, while 14% cited fights, violence, and vandalism as the major problem. The second part of the survey included approximately an additional 400 African-American people to ensure that African-American opinions were fully represented in the community opinions sampled. Among these respondents, 25% identified discipline as the major problem and 18% identified violence.

Teachers identified discipline as the top problem and priority in the schools, with 52% of white teachers and 65% of African-American teachers selecting it. These people, who are in the closest position to make accurate observations, found violence to be less of a problem. The responses were quite similar for both races with 14% of white teachers 12% of African-American teachers identifying violence as the top problem (Plain Talk, 1997, p. 213). School principals, who must deal with student behavior problems on a daily basis, rated discipline as a major problem and violence as a relatively insignificant school issue.

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Discussion

There is little doubt that the parents of school age children have a concern about violence and the safety of their children. Each incident of violent behavior at a school in the Little Rock community is reported widely in the news media, so it is natural that a concern for the safety of children would eventually grow in the minds of conscientious parents. Based on the information reviewed by the task force which developed the Plain Talk report, however, a disservice is rendered to the public schools when safety and discipline are considered as one, rather than in two separate categories.

Based on the police reports and school disciplinary information reviewed, there appears to be relatively little evidence that the public schools in Little Rock are inherently unsafe places for students to attend. School principals did not find violence to be an overwhelming problem, and only 13% of teachers and 18% of parents identified it as the major problem.

Discipline, on the other hand, is a much different situation. There is little doubt that discipline is a major problem that must be addressed by the LRSD. Those finding discipline too lax were 46% of the school principals, 52% of the white teachers, 65% of the African-American teachers, and 70% of the community respondents. There is some evidence in Little Rock, however, to support the contention by Leal (1994) that "it is a relatively small number of students who are the troublemakers" (p. 41).

A lack of school discipline is a problem for everyone concerned. Freiberg, Stein, and Parker (1995) pointed out that, "The misbehaving student is not the only one who experiences reduced learning through disruptive behavior. The entire classroom is interrupted while the teacher stops to react to the disruptive student(s)" (p. 437). Rubel and Blauvelt (1994) emphasized that a good overall school climate is essential to successful learning, and noted that ". . . school security and school discipline are inextricably linked, and both are tied to school climate as well" (p. 28).

How must the problems be solved? First, there must be an acknowledgment that violence and safety are significantly different issues in public schools than are discipline

problems. Criminal activity must be dealt with through appropriate law enforcement and legal means, but the evidence from Little Rock is that it represents a relatively small amount of the behavioral turmoil experienced in the schools. Discipline, however, is observed by teachers, school officials, and parents, both white and African-American, to be a problem.

Rubel and Blauvelt (1994) suggested that a positive school climate and proper security require careful attention to policies and procedures, with the attitude toward discipline by the school principal as a key ingredient to an orderly school. They ask if board policies are clear and properly distinguish between types of incidents. "For example, do board policies recognize 'battery' as a crime and 'fighting' as a disciplinary offense?" (p. 29). As noted in Little Rock, the terminology used in the revised disciplinary handbook is more harsh than in the past, and it may possibly create more problems than it solves. Data on the types of disciplinary offenses are routinely collected by school districts, but Freiberg, Stein, and Parker (1995) found that such information is "seldom used to make decisions about improving a discipline situation or designing a response that reflects specific learner needs" (p. 425).

Noguera (1995) continued with suggestions that school facilities should be reviewed to identify ways to make them more attractive and pleasant and create a more humanized environment. He also emphasized the need for teachers, principals, and other school personnel to take steps to become well acquainted with the communities in which they work. In many cases these individuals live outside the community and have little immediate knowledge of the environments in which the students in their classes live. More awareness of the community condition may tend to bring together the students and school officials in working toward a school climate that is beneficial to all.

Whether the unrelenting and sensationalistic reporting of school incidents by the news media, and overreactions by politicians, school boards, and school administrators will permit a more realistic view of the true situation to emerge is yet to be seen. It is essential to the preservation of the historic American strength of public schools, however, that cooler heads prevail among school administrators and teachers, parents, and members of the overall

community in collectively reviewing the information available, honestly and realistically identifying the key problems, and devising solutions that directly address those problems. As stated by Noguera, "New strategies for providing an education that is perceived as meaningful, and relevant, and that begins to tap into the intrinsic desire of all individuals to obtain greater personal fulfillment, must be devised and supported. Anything short of this will leave us mired in a situation that grows increasingly depressing and dangerous every day" (p. 207).

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